



**Building an Economy that Uplifts Women and Families:
The Importance of an Accessible, Affordable Child Care System
for Young Parents and Student Parents**

Written Testimony Submitted to the
U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee
By the Institute for Women's Policy Research
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Chairman Neal, Ranking Member Brady, and members of the Committee:

Despite overwhelming evidence that access to high-quality early care and learning leads to long-term benefits for children and parents, the majority of families in the U.S. lack access to affordable child care, with more than half of families living in “child care deserts.”¹ The lack of access to affordable, reliable child care not only makes it harder for parents to work, it perpetuates systemic gender, racial, and class inequalities by relying on unpaid or undervalued labor performed by women; Black, Latinx, and other workers of color; and immigrant workers, while making it difficult for them to access reliable child care.²

The need for affordable child care is also essential to the ability of parents to seek the education and training needed to secure family-sustaining careers. Holding a postsecondary credential was already integral to securing living-wage employment before the onset of COVID-19; the pandemic has only exacerbated the importance of attaining post-high school education and training in light of unprecedented job loss among workers who do not hold postsecondary credentials.³

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR)—a leading national think tank that builds evidence to shape policies that grow women's power and influence, close inequality gaps, and improve the economic wellbeing of families—appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee for the hearing, “In Their Own Words: Paid Leave, Child Care, and an Economy that Failed Women.” Drawing on evidence-based research, this testimony describes why a historic investment in universal access to affordable, high-quality child care is critical for young working parents and student parents, and for broader goals of social, economic, and racial equity.

- Access to affordable, high-quality child care is critical to enabling young parents to balance work and family needs. Young workers are concentrated in low-wage, service-sector jobs lacking paid leave and flexible schedules.⁴ Nearly one in five (18.7 percent) young adults aged 18 to 30 have children living in the same household.⁵ Erratic schedules and the lack of paid leave create significant challenges for low-wage workers in terms of work-family conflict, difficult child care arrangements, and parenting struggles. Without access to affordable and reliable child care, young working parents have to

rely on a patchwork of care from family and friends, which can be difficult to secure. More than half (56 percent) of young parents are single mothers, compounding their challenges related to care and economic security.⁶

- Access to affordable, reliable child care is essential to the ability of parents enrolled in college and job training to enter and complete their education and training programs. Nearly one-quarter of all undergraduate students—roughly 3.8 million—are parents of dependent children, making child care a critical support for their success.⁷ Data from one community college show, for example, that students' usage of the campus-based child care center led to a 21 percent increase in degree attainment over the attainment rate for student parents who did not access the center.⁸ Unfortunately, under half of public higher education institutions have onsite child care, with community colleges being particularly unlikely to offer the service, despite the fact that the largest share of parenting students are enrolled at public two-year institutions.⁹

Without affordable child care, student parents are often forced to suspend enrollment before graduating. Nationally, student parents are nearly twice as likely to leave college without a degree or certificate than their peers who do not have children.¹⁰ COVID-19 has also caused many parents enrolled in education to reconsider their pursuit of postsecondary credentials: Data from the Lumina-Gallup Student Study found that nearly two in five student parents (37 percent of those surveyed) considered suspending their enrollment due to caregiving demands in the last six months.¹¹ When parents do complete their training or education, there are substantial economic and social benefits for their families and society at large. For families, these benefits include significantly improved lifetime earnings, better health and wellbeing, and increased chances of success for children. For U.S. society, this translates to increased tax revenue, reduced spending on public assistance, and a more highly skilled workforce.¹²

- Access to child care is essential for successful completion of workforce development programs. According to administrators of community-based training and other workforce development programs, lack of access to child care is the second most common reason for non-completion of career and technical education programs.¹³ A third (34 percent) of training participants with children under five who received some child care assistance said that without it they would not have been able to complete their programs; mothers were more likely to say so than fathers, underscoring the importance of child care access for broader gender equity goals.¹⁴ As states increasingly focus on vocational training as a pathway for adults to recover from the ongoing economic fallout caused by COVID-19, ensuring parents have access to supportive onramps to training and are able to complete their programs successfully represents a pivotal factor in overall recovery efforts.
- The existing U.S. child care infrastructure is insufficient and inaccessible for parents seeking postsecondary education and training as a route to economic

mobility. For example, the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program—the only federal funding source that supports low-income students’ access to affordable child care—serves less than one percent of the estimated need among eligible parents with children under six.¹⁵ Parents pursuing a college degree can also face challenges accessing Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) assistance due to state-level restrictions in eligibility for parents enrolled in education and training—despite the fact that nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of all college students who are parents of children under six live with incomes at 200 percent below the federal poverty threshold.¹⁶ Just 14 percent of parents receiving CCDF assistance nationally do so for time spent in education and training or a combination of education/training and work.¹⁷

- Lack of access to child care has led to gender and racial/ethnic disparities in work outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Young women across racial and ethnic groups are more likely than their male counterparts to identify care responsibilities as the main reason for not working for pay during the pandemic.¹⁸ This issue is especially pronounced for young Black and Latina women—13.1 percent young Black women and 11.5 percent young Latina women say they did not work for pay due to care responsibilities during the pandemic, the highest share among young adults.¹⁹ Young Black and Latina women are also most likely among young adults aged 16 to 24 to be single parents (12.2 percent and 7.4 percent, respectively).²⁰ Building a robust care infrastructure is essential for reducing gender and racial inequalities in both paid and unpaid work.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has led to disproportionate job loss among workers without post-high school credentials, meaning workers who have lost jobs may need to reskill or upskill to secure family-sustaining employment.²¹ Many of these workers, especially women, have children—many are single parents, and many are Black and Latinx.²² Single parents and Black, Indigenous, and Latinx adults are the least likely to hold postsecondary credentials compared with other U.S. adults.²³ Ensuring they have access to opportunities to earn the credentials and skills that are necessary for filling in-demand jobs is important for their ability to establish economic security and to this country’s future economic wellbeing.
- Investment in child care for working parents and parents enrolled in college or job training is long overdue. Even before the pandemic, the United States significantly lagged behind other industrialized countries in public investment in early care and education.²⁴ COVID-19 has plunged the nation’s already precarious child care system further into crisis. Establishing universal child care on a national scale would represent a historic step towards building a more equitable and sustainable system that uplifts the chances of success for all families regardless of race, ethnicity, or geographic location.²⁵ It would be a foundational investment in equitable social and economic progress—for families, for communities, and for the country more broadly. It would also result in substantial economic benefits: IWPR analysis finds that investing in

child care as proposed by the American Families Plan would save families \$96 billion in the first year and nearly \$500 billion over five years.²⁶

Such an investment must include living wages and fair labor standards for caregivers, especially as those jobs increasingly require higher degrees for entry and as child-care jobs are overwhelmingly filled by women of color with low incomes.²⁷ It must also include investment in avenues to access high-quality child care and family supports for parents who are pursuing education and training as a route to economic security and mobility.²⁸

Ensuring that all working families, including those in which parents are enrolled in or wish to pursue postsecondary education and training, have access to child care assistance would lead to more supportive, equitable pathways to opportunity and economic equity. This moment demands a sustained, mandatory, and historic investment in the U.S. child care system. We applaud the Committee for their leadership in highlighting this critical need. At IWPR, we stand at the ready to support on this important goal to ensure an economic recovery that uplifts women, families, and communities across the United States.

Sincerely,

Institute for Women's Policy Research

Endnotes

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